

Courtesy of the Democratic Union of Mongolia



Demonstrations for democracy in Mongolia's capital city, Ulaanbaatar, in 1990. Women were deeply involved in the nation's democracy movement its earliest stages.

The Secret Driving Force Behind Mongolia's Successful Democracy

BY OYUNGEREL TSEDEV DAMBA

Twenty-five years after Mongolia's first free and democratic election, the country is commemorating the peaceful revolution that radically changed this country. Throughout these celebrations, we are reflecting on both the result of the changes of the past 25 years and the means by which those changes occurred. Not only are Mongolians marking the occasion, the nation is finally being heralded by the international community as an example of peaceful democratization. In my role as a member of the State Great Hural (parliament) of Mongolia, I am often asked, "How did you manage to do it?" Or, less frequently now, "How did we never notice Mongolia's democracy before?" Hearing these queries so frequently prompted me to seriously reflect upon the process by which Mongolia transformed from a Soviet satellite state into a robust and thriving democracy.

The harsh winter of 1989-1990 was a critical juncture in my country's history. It was too cold for any foreign reporters to come here and witness first-hand Ulaanbaatar's demonstrations. Peaceful, modest demonstration started on December 10, 1989, at the Youth Square of Ulaanbaatar to celebrate International Human Rights Day, and to announce the birth of the new non-communist movement "Democratic Union of Mongolia." The demonstrations grew bigger and filled the square by mid-January. Mongolia's weekend used to be only one day—Sunday—and the demonstrations took place almost every Sunday from January through May.

There was no bloodshed, no windows broken, and not even a fist fight during those frigid Sunday demonstrations for democracy. The media all too frequently overlook the dog that didn't bark in favor of reporting on the rabid dog that bites; Mongolia's peaceful demonstrations would not make for catchy headlines, and thus were neglected by international media in favor of splashier events elsewhere. Mongolia's democracy rallies and events happened at the same time as

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protests were coming to a head in Eastern Europe. The international press was focused on Eastern Europe, leaving Mongolians to the process of demanding and constructing our own democracy.

Mongolia's successful transition, though overlooked until recent years, has profound implications for the international community. When I escorted high-level government, NGO, and media representatives from Myanmar during a recent visit to Mongolia, I was asked many questions regarding issues that we take for granted. As the head of the Mongolian-Myanmar parliamentary group, I extended my best wishes to the Myanmar people's effort to reform their country into a thriving democracy. I further promised to share my knowledge and experience whenever asked. As the head of the Mongolia-Kyrgyzstan Intergovernmental Committee, I also had a chance to share our stories with Kyrgyz politicians who have bold aspirations to change their country peacefully and successfully "like Mongolia."

Compared with many post-communist Central Asian countries, and even some Eastern European countries—most notably Russia—Mongolia's public is the least nostalgic about the past communist years. According to the Sant Maral Foundation, an independent polling nongovernmental organization (NGO), over 90 percent of the Mongolian public voted "No" every quarter for the past 25 years when asked, "Do you regret that Mongolia chose democracy in 1990?" This is the highest level and the most consistent national consensus among other regular, repetitive questions that Sant Maral asks in its quarterly polls. From the family point of view, it means that almost every family in Mongolia—which was the world's second communist country after Russia (the USSR) less than a

century ago—appreciates the democratic choice that the nation made.

Why is this important? It is a big responsibility for Mongolia to act as a democratic model to those countries that aspire to be "like Mongolia." We must critically examine our democratic history and share that experience frankly so that other countries are not lulled into thinking that democracy is easy to achieve. We should tell the full truth about the open and hidden forces that led to our success. Mongolia's new political parties, its activist student leaders, our non-communist associations, and our high level decisionmakers were the key driving forces behind Mongolia's peaceful transition to democracy. But these groups alone cannot explain Mongolia's transformation; women have also played an integral part in Mongolia's democratic history.

Ladies with Pigs and Horses

It is at times hard to believe Sant Maral's numbers—after all, Mongolians refer to the transition to democracy and a market economy as "the hard years." Even politicians use this term in their election campaigns, while Mongolian journalists can expect to use the phrase hundreds of times over the course of their careers. It has become a trope when speaking about the transition away from communism.

As Mongolia made its economic transition from a centrally planned socialist economy to a market economy, and a political transition from one-party communist party rule to multi-party democracy, all the consequences of this rapid simultaneous transition fell upon our citizens in the hardest way. The first result of disconnecting Mongolia from communism was to reorient our national economy—meaning that we severed the ties that brought Soviet assistance and trade. Our state budget

collapsed; we lacked the ability to pay the salaries of thousands upon thousands of people. At the same time, higher education and many health services stopped being free. The effects of these changes were seen even in stores, where shelves were empty of everything but salt. Given the hardships our people faced, nostalgia about our communist past could have surged. But it did not. Mongolians agreed with then President Ochirbat's call, "to tighten our belts," and proceed further with democratic changes and the development of a market economy. President Ochirbat's "tighten our belts" formula is a very familiar phrase used by almost all fathers and mothers when family food is scarce. In addition, there was another valuable proverb widely circulating: "It is better to suffer at your own right than to live plentiful under someone else's power." Democracy and the market economy offered a simple herder not only the freedom to speak his or her mind, but also the freedom to own sheep and horses, as many as he or she could herd. Compared to the communist ban on all private property, including herds that exceeded six sheep per family, the market economy opened the door for herder families as wide as the steppe grasslands. However, families still had to go through immediate economic hardships first.

At least one of every two working persons in an average family either became unemployed or was forced into early retirement on a miniscule pension by mid-1992. Construction and investment on any new building project came to a standstill. The engineers and technicians were the first to lose their jobs. As other offices cut their employment, women were the first to be fired or sent to early pension. If a woman raised four or more children, she was offered her pension at

the age of 45 instead of the usual 55 years. During and after the transition, women consistently remain more unemployed than men. According to the National Statistical Information Service, the average percentage of women among the registered unemployed during the period 2000-2014 was 54.48 percent.¹

The government of Mongolia, while seeing almost one-third of its less than one million person workforce become unemployed and witnessing the disappearance of goods from the stores, started issuing "foreign passports" to its citizens in early 1991. A foreign passport meant a Mongolian citizen could travel abroad—a right tightly guarded and controlled under communism. Suddenly, hundreds of thousands of Mongolian citizens had the freedom to travel abroad that they had not enjoyed since 13th century, the time of Genghis Khan. The numerous Mongolians who sought their fortunes abroad would return with big bags of goods to sell in Mongolia. Those bags, due to their round shape and fully stuffed image, received the nickname "pig." And the men and women who did such trading and brought much needed goods and food to local stores were called "pig carriers." Among the first "pig carriers" were young people who couldn't find jobs after their graduation from schools, and women with life experience who had been "liberated" from the state workforce. Instead of being nostalgic about a state-provided salary, women went into trading, herding, farming, sewing, and opening new, private companies. Nobody counted them in the 1990s, and there was no official statistical data on how many women became "pig carriers." Of them, some switched to the official labor market as the economy improved, some became big business owners, but the majority of women remained small scale traders. In

2012, the Mongolian Parliament passed a law that allowed everyone who did not have an official work record during the 1990-2000 period to apply for a “10 years of employment” credit, so that those who are reaching the pension age would be eligible for a full pension based on employment of 25 years or more. “During 1990-2000, people were unemployed not because they were lazy, but because they worked day and night throughout the big shift without an official labor record,” I argued in support of the new law before Parliament. When the law was implemented 552,000 people applied to register and 54.5 percent of them were women.²

Following the 1991 livestock privatization, where herding, after 32 years, again became a

family living rather than a state-owned communist cooperative, thousands of herder women became the major income earners for their families. Young pensioner women and recently fired women went into herding in order to raise the few animals that their children and relatives received thanks to privatization. Women on horseback rounded up their private animals, milked their cows, migrated from pasture to pasture, and fought through winter blizzards.

Women, with unexpected dynamism and optimism, became the most resilient force during Mongolia’s economic transition crises. Even when inflation reached 100-500 percent, women still managed to bring bread to their families, and their role in the family increased



Courtesy of Oyungei Tsedevdamba (2006)

Narantsetseg Baasan, a single woman living and making her way alone with her son by northern border of Mongolia (near Siberia) in Erdenebulgan soum, Huvsgul province.

significantly as a result. The number of single mothers skyrocketed during these years. Families fell apart as depressed, violent, and drunk men abused their wives. A new social term, “family headed by a woman,” was introduced in social discussions. While the “head of family” was traditionally a man, the fact that the 14-15 percent of Mongolian families are consistently “led” by women has forced the Mongolian government to collect official statistical data on the gender of the “heads of families” since 2003. According to the National Statistical Information Service, 73-77.8 percent of 81,902-103,192 single “heads of families” were women during the period 2003-2014.³

Without women’s active participation in Mongolia’s economic transition, the prospects for Mongolia’s democracy would have been much gloomier. Women worked hard to ensure their families were resilient amidst the sweeping changes. They were a critical force pushing society towards an overwhelming national consensus to further democratic transition throughout some of the most challenging stages.

Peaceful Transition on Paper

When the Mongolian Democratic Union, the first ever non-communist movement in Mongolia, held a huge rally in mid-January 1990, over 100,000 Mongolians filled Sukhbaatar Square in front of Government House, holding various signs expressing their dreams about a new society. Of course “Democracy,” “Human Rights,” and “Freedom,” were the most common and the loudest demands of the gatherers, but there was another famous symbol among them. It was Genghis Khan’s portrait—but with an artistic, political twist.

I can still vividly remember that placard. It was a small blue and white sign. There was a frozen window depicted on it. Those who never lived in Mongolia prior to the vacuum window era, cannot imagine what a frozen window is. It means that ice is forming on the inside of a building’s windows; opaque ice crystals spread across a window so that no one within can see out.

The famous sign depicted just such a frozen window, and on it was a human hand called “democracy” wiping away the window’s ice so that from within one could just make out the face of Genghis Khan—Mongolia’s great hero and law-giver, whom the communists had tried to erase from the public memory. Even to utter his name was a crime.

The sign exactly described the feelings of the Mongolian people of that time. Finally, we did not have communist censorship of our media, culture, literature, movies, and holidays. We were wiping aside a frigid past that had obscured our traditions. The search for a new national identity for the new non-communist Mongolia had begun.

As the country moved toward ever more rapid transition, it required an enormous amount of intellectual work, writing, translating, speaking, and reporting. Translations about democracies and market economies were needed, new laws had to be enacted, new standards, norms, and guidance had to be drafted and advocated, new songs needed to be sung...if we truly wished to create a new democratic society through peaceful means. Free print media and the newly free radio and television channels carried all manner of information to assure that citizens kept up with the rapid changes.

During this busy period women overwhelmingly carried the burden of the

paperwork of transition by their enormous capacity to learn, adapt, and get things done on time. However, the salaries of teachers, cultural workers, lawyers, and doctors experienced a free fall during the early years of democracy that caused the majority of the male workforce in these sectors to quit their positions in favor of work in the rapidly expanding private sector. Today Mongolia's biggest gender gap exists in politics, mining, education, and health; in the first two sectors males are dominant, while women comprise 75.8 percent and 81.4 percent of the education and health sectors, respectively.⁴

When we look back at the changes we made in our laws, almost all of them had hard-working women in the project teams. They were modestly named as advisers, vice-directors, assistants, or officers—their bosses were almost always men. But women learned foreign languages earlier than their male counterparts; they completed new schooling while having babies; and they devoted their time to studying solutions to our pressing problems. Without Mongolia's new class of writing and drafting women, Mongolia's new laws, rules, and regulations could not have come out in such numbers as they have over the past 25 years.

Women have continued to play a prominent role in Mongolia's intellectual landscape. Today, in Mongolia's biggest bookstores, books by women authors dominate the best seller lists. In cinemas, women produce movies equally with those of men. In civil society, the longest serving, most passionate activists and leaders are women. Indeed, nearly 90 percent of civil society leaders are women. In public media, 6 of 11 daily newspaper Editors-in-Chief and a majority of journalists are women.⁵

Shortly after I was elected President of The Democratic Women's Union—the women's organization of the Democratic Party of Mongolia—in spring of 2011, I was invited to a women's rights day gathering at the Buyant-Ukhaa Sports Palace in Ulaanbaatar. I was seated among 10 honorable male guests; they were all elected officials from the Democratic Party (DP). The 6,000 seats of the sports hall were filled with women who actively worked for the Democratic Party's political campaigns—many for the past 25 years. I was given only two minutes to speak to the audience.

"Do you see these gentlemen?" I began my speech as loudly as I could. "Please raise your hand if you worked at least once to get these gentlemen elected?" All raised their hands.

"If you worked twice for the election campaign in support of the DP, please raise both of your hands!" I called out. All raised two hands.

"If you worked for every democratic election campaign, please stand up," I announced. All 6,000 women stood up cheerfully shouting, "Yes!"

Then I turned to the male MPs elected from Ulaanbaatar; "If you don't approve a women's candidate quota in the election law, if our party turns down the women's quota like it did in 2007, we shall not work for you in the coming 2012 election campaign!" All the audience shouted, "Yes!"

The election law was changed soon after, and Mongolian women got their quota. For the first time the number of women elected to parliament reached 14.5 percent. It was a big jump compared to three percent in the previous parliament.⁶

Women from not only the Democratic Party, but from every political party are the biggest force in spreading campaign messages to the voters. The vast majority of election campaign staffs consist of women in the major parties. They write speeches. They draft press releases. They speak to voters door to door. They organize meetings and they work tirelessly during every election campaign and make sure the democratic process has ever deepening roots in Mongolian society.

Freelancers and Watchdogs

Throughout the communist period, the only job provider was the state. The state sponsored all literature and all media. Even attorneys were state-provided people who did not serve as a defendant's independent attorney in a

case. The state sponsored children's, youth, and women's organizations, the trade union, and the only legitimate communist party. In fact, the state budget delegated to the Central Committee of the former communist party exceeded the budget delegated to the entire education sector of the government. The communist party tax was the highest tax a party member would pay per month, and because of the party's economic interest, every highly-paid employee of a state job was required to be a party member.

When communism fell, the state stopped its sponsoring role for most of public life. Democracy leaders demanded that the state end its involvement in social affairs. New laws on advocacy and NGOs were passed in 1997 allowing citizens to operate independently



Courtesy of Azjargal Dashseren

A Democratic Women's event in 2011, Ulaanbaatar

from state guidance and, in many cases, against the preferences of state stakeholders.

It required courage and expertise to take advantage of these new opportunities. The history of political repression against those who complained about state agencies or the decisions of high level officials were fresh in the minds of Mongolians. The first independent attorneys who could defend a common citizen in court were trailblazers in their autonomy from the state.

Those first defense attorneys were self-employed by necessity. They had to live with modest income from odd jobs as Mongolians hadn't yet become accustomed to paying for such services. Curiously, the first independent defense attorneys were senior women who already had modest incomes from their pensions. As in the case of the trading pioneers,

the pioneer human rights defenders were women who were forced to leave their previous jobs prematurely. To name a few who have become iconic watchdogs: women's rights defender Ms. Zanaa Jurmed; Ms. Tsend-Ayush, a defense attorney representing hundreds of victims of human rights violations; Ms. Naranjargal Khashkhuu, a tireless advocate of press freedom. In civil society as well, women took a leading role in the proliferation of NGOs. These groups were human rights activists, press freedom advocates, women's rights networkers, democracy promoting trainers, and transparency and accountability watchdogs. By 2002, five years since the law on NGOs was adopted, Mongolia had over 30 human rights watchdog organizations, all of which had women executive directors and women spokespersons.



Courtesy of Oyungerel Tsedevdamba

Oyungerel Tsedevdamba setting up an office for the Liberty Center, a human rights watchdog, in August 2000. She served as its Executive Director from 2000 – 2004.

Was it because most of these jobs weren't paid and required an enormous amount of time and altruism? Partly yes. Men of their generation were busy building up the private sector of newly capitalist Mongolia, and struggling to build a new consumer market in the country. Meanwhile, necessary issues for the new democratic society were addressed by un- and underpaid women. Being over worked and underpaid became a lifestyle of an entire generation who worked multiple jobs among which at least one was entirely or partly philanthropic. Multi-tasking young women had to do careful family planning and the birth rate dropped by half for the first two decades of the democratic era (from 36.94 percent in 1990 to 17.9 percent in 2005).⁷

The other reason for women's dominance in the earliest watchdog positions was related to their courage and independence from "brotherly" networks. As mentioned above, a major change happening in the country, along with democracy, was the search for a new national identity. For the first time since 1953, the national holiday, Lunar New Year, was allowed to be celebrated without state constraints and control; and, for the first time since 1959, the Naadam festival allowed private horse-trainers to celebrate their horses in the Naadam. Men's horse-training communities were immediately formed in many provinces and *soums* (districts). The number of wrestling clubs jumped as many young men sought opportunities to join. Interest in archery and knuckle-bone shooting surged uniting men team by team. Just these four national sports brought together half a million men in little more than three years. They became "brothers of culture." Meanwhile, the rapidly growing business sector was helping

men to network among and become dependent upon each other.

When it comes to independent watchdogs, there remained only a few male journalists, accompanied by a handful of media and independent voices. Political parties would pinpoint the mistakes in each other's decisions, but would not serve as the protector of human rights or advocate a specific individual's case. The regularly and reliably operating watchdogs were not being formed from the men's world. They were to be born outside of the current legal system, and the outside of the comradesly and cultural brotherhood network.

Therefore, it was natural for educated women to take on these responsibilities. Luckily, Mongolia had enough highly educated women who were passionate about these issues and who were not afraid of helping to protect human rights and individual freedom during the ups and downs of our transition period. Even today, not all basic human rights are fully guaranteed in Mongolia and watchdogs are scarce. But if Mongolia is to remain democratic, free, and peaceful, there must always be watchdogs to remind the state to address and resolve mistakes on human rights, the environment, and the other major issues of our times.

A Natural Maturity Embraced by Families

A distinct consensus emerged during the period of Mongolia's democratic transition to leave the old communist party intact. In February 1990, following a hunger strike led by Bat-Uul Erdene—a young teacher at that time, but now the Mayor of Ulaanbaatar City—the State Deputy Hural made a change in the constitution to enable a multiparty system in Mongolia. The phrase, "The Mongolian

People's Revolutionary Party must be the leading and guiding force of the country," was eliminated from the Constitution.

At the same time, the Eastern European countries were banning their domestic communist parties from participating in state affairs and in the multiparty systems that were forming. Even in 1993, when Russia joined the democratization process, it banned the communist party for a five-year period. Mongolia did not follow suit. Instead the old communist party of Mongolia was allowed to reinvent itself as an ordinary, competing political party.

Perhaps as a consequence, the former communist party remained in power for the majority of the 25 years of our nation's democratic changes. Newly formed political parties had no other choice than to "grow up" in

order to compete with the old communist party's established national political network.

It took six years for the new political parties to win in a national parliamentary election for the first time, and 22 years for them to achieve enough success in local elections to compete on a national basis with the former communist party, now the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party. The Democratic Party of Mongolia, to which I belong, had to build and unify itself through the merger of 11 new parties that were born in the earliest phase of the democratic revolution.

The seemingly long and hard road of the Democratic Party of Mongolia, the Civil Will Party, and other younger political forces had national appeal. As the new parties grew naturally—without banning the older political force—Mongolians became convinced that



Campaign debate between Oyungerel from Democratic Party of Mongolia and Enkhuvshin from Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party in Huvsgul province in 2008.

Courtesy of Oyungerel Tsedevdamba

transformative political and economic changes could be achieved without killing, banning, or hating others.

This process created an important peace of mind for women, who typically bear the brunt of feuding children. A mother no longer had to confront the hard dilemma of her two children belonging to two different parties. It was acceptable for one child to remain loyal to the party of his or her parents while the other decided to support a new political party, as political competition became the norm. Anxiety within families decreased and members of extended families with a range of political preferences were much more cordial with each other when the former communist party was allowed to transform itself, rather than being forcibly dissolved. But, the pressure to democratize always existed, and still exists today. Today all the political parties of Mongolia are under public demand to democratize their practices, make their budgets transparent, and enact higher gender quotas.

I recently visited my herding and farming relatives in the far north of Mongolia. It was a ceremonial family reunion where everyone was dressed up for the occasion. I teared-up when I saw them wearing their medals of honor. Half of them wore pins and medals awarded from the Mongolian People's Party, the former communist party, and half of them wore medals like "Freedom Order," given for their contribution to the democracy struggle, but mostly given to those who worked for the newly formed parties. They were all proud of who they were and their role in Mongolia's peaceful transition to democracy.

When we started discussing politics, they were all very pragmatic, arguing what the central and the local governments should do, how we should change the laws, and which

national policies were making it difficult for them to make a living. I knew that this varied group would vote for different parties and that each of them had grievances with certain policies and parties. But, more importantly, I knew that if a Sant Maral poll taker were to ask them, "Do you regret that Mongolia chose democracy in 1990?" they would say, "Never!"

I enjoyed looking at my own pluralistic extended family. How different it was from what my mother saw when all her relatives had to be communist party members. How very different it was from my grandmother who saw her father, and most of our Buddhist relatives, shot dead during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s.

Mongolia is fortunate to have made its transition to democracy so peacefully, but every step of it was hard work. Each and every reform required its own meticulous "kitchen chores." Without the involvement of free, educated, dynamic, and courageous women, Mongolia's democratization could not have succeeded so well so quickly. "Kitchen chores" at home include those tasks that no one notices, no one pays, and no one gives awards for. Everyday cleaning, everyday cooking, baby-sitting, child-caring, livestock rounding, and so on are still underappreciated. It took a woman Minister of Agriculture, Ms. Burmaa Radnaa, to notice that the Mongolian government gives the award of "Best Herder" only to a male member of a family and that there was no woman best herder in our entire history. Beginning from 2015, "the best herder" award is given to both the husband and wife of the winning herder family.

While women herders of Mongolia rode their horses and rounded their animals in freezing temperatures during the winter of 1995, I watched news about an amazing event

on the television. Women leaders from around the world gathered in Beijing at the Fourth World Conference on Women to inspire us—women of all countries. I watched the news holding my breath in order to grasp every word about the importance of women’s rights and gender equality.

In the evening, after my two children went to bed, I picked up my pen and paper and began working on my second job—translations, for which I earned \$3 per page. Over that weekend, I woke up early to teach primary English to a group of local people in order to augment my \$40 monthly salary by another \$5 per week. Like many Mongolian women, I worked a handful of jobs to make ends meet as a single mother then. All three jobs combined—working as a government officer, translating, and tutoring—brought just enough income to feed my family and provide for our small needs, and donate up to 30 percent of it to my local Democratic Party activities, human rights causes, a school, and a kindergarten.

Throughout the past 25 years, I always donated a substantial portion of my income to political campaigns, human rights causes, and humanitarian projects, despite the fact that my income never reached what even a low-wage worker in Europe or the United States would earn. I donated my time and money because I always felt rich; I knew I was blessed to have the freedom to contribute to my country’s political development and I was always inspired and proud to contribute to my country’s transformation to democracy.

So, too, were many Mongolian women. Democracy has grown in Mongolia from the seeds planted by these women in the private sector, civil society, the political realm, and their own homes. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Mongolian National Statistical Office, <<http://www.1212.mn/>>.

² Data obtain by author from Mongolian National Social Insurance Office.

³ Mongolia has 700,000 families. As of 2014, 103,000 families have single parent. These data were obtained from the Mongolian National Statistical Office, <<http://www.1212.mn/>>.

⁴ Women in education sector number 61,557 out of 81,204 in total. Source: Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, “Statistical Information of the Education sector on Academic Year of 2014-2015, part 1,” Ulaanbaatar, (2015). [Боловсролын салбарын 2014-2015 оны хичээлийн жилийн статистикийн мэдээллийн эмхэтгэл-1]. Data collected from pages 18, 78, and 117.

⁵ Women in health sector number 37,495 out of 46,057. Source: Center for Health Development, “Health Indicators 2014,” Ulaanbaatar, (2014). [Эрүүл мэндийн үзүүлэлт]. Data collected from page 124.

⁶ Internom’s 50 bestselling author’s list includes 15 Mongolians – 10 of these are women and 5 are men. <<https://www.internom.mn/%D0%B1%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B%D0%BB%D0%B5%D1%80/>>.

⁷ The State Great Hural (Parliament) of Mongolia, Member List: <<http://www.parliament.mn/who?type=3>>.

⁸ Mongolian National Statistical Office, <<http://www.1212.mn/>>.